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Sailing Across the City with the Father Who Was Me

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Sailing Across the City with the Father Who Was Me

A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Jeff Corey

Spring 2014

THESIS OF Jeff Corey APPROVED BY

_____ DATE _____

GREGORY SPATZ, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

_____ DATE _____

SAMUEL LIGON, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

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Sailing Across the City with the Father Who Was Me

1.

I think the hedge was a boxwood. It was shaped into a column next to the sidewalk, near the entrance to a bank. I wasn't talking to it, as much as that happened to be the place where I spoke out loud, though I wasn't on my way into or out of the bank. In fact, I had no business there. I knew I was talking outside of my head, but didn't care. It was the first time I'd had such an episode, as I faced the boxwood on a warm May morning, cars passing me by, and said aloud the thing that had been rattling around my head like some kind of prayer: *For the love of God and Jesus and not Satan, no deals with Satan.* I remember my voice was a mix of gravel and nasal, and I kept saying the last line over and over: *No deals with Satan, no deals with Satan.*

It was strange, the level of consciousness I maintained, knowing that what I was doing was abnormal, but at the same time not caring. I moved past the boxwood and to the intersection, where the light changed and the signal told me to go ahead and walk, but I just stood there, my voice rising, and pictured myself in one of the cars that drove by.

Growing up, whenever my family drove down to Seattle for a dinner or ballgame, and we saw people talking to themselves, Dad would always say, "Don't stare." But I felt like every driver that passed through the intersection did stare, though the ones waiting next to me at the light kept their eyes averted.

I made it a couple feet into the intersection and got the prayer back inside my head, but felt like I said it wrong, like I might've said *deals with Satan* instead of *no deals with Satan* and had to walk back and start over. If I said the prayer out loud I knew I could get it right every time because I would let out only the words that I intended to say. But inside my head it was more difficult to say precisely what I wanted to—words tended to creep in or sneak out. I took a deep breath and, as I again waited for the signal to try crossing the street, I was also waiting for my test results. I'd gotten tested for HIV eight days earlier, and was told by the nurse at the time that if I hadn't heard back after a week, to give them a call. So I made the call, and was told that I should find out later that day. When I'd gone in to get tested, I wanted to be able to take, and trust, the saliva test that gave instant results, but the nurse told me that test only had 92 percent accuracy, whereas the blood test was considered conclusive. I chose the blood test, knowing the wait would be agonizing, but worth the definitiveness. Now, making my way to the bus stop, I kept thinking I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, but each time I checked, it just showed me that I was falling further behind schedule. The light changed and I said the prayer aloud as I walked across. I made it to the bus stop and forced myself to stay quiet because there were several students already there and one of them looked like a kid who had taken Intro to History of Western Civilizations from me. He sort of half-nodded in a way that suggested familiarity, so I did the same, then found a telephone pole to lean on, out of his sightline.

I figured the call would come while I was on the bus, and decided that, if it did, I'd let it go to voicemail so I could hear the results in a place where no one would see me. I sat down near the back and set my briefcase on the seat next to mine. Instead of pulling

out a book like usual, I just sat there, repeating the prayer inside my head in case the call came. I'm not sure how convinced I was that I'd actually contracted HIV, but I felt like I needed help in controlling the outcome of the test; and if I got the desired result, I wanted to be sure it wasn't at the risk of eternal damnation because I'd let myself think that I'd made a deal with Satan.

There was the option to call in sick or just cancel my class, but I'd already missed a couple days leading up to getting tested, and I didn't want it to become an issue. The bus arrived on campus at 9:55, leaving me five minutes to make it to my classroom, which was ten minutes away. I repeated the prayer inside my head as I walked toward the bus' exit, knowing that I had to get it right with my first step onto campus. Otherwise, if I heard good news while at school, it would be tainted. As I stepped off, I thought to hold my phone to my ear in case the prayer got outside my head, which it did toward the end as I was saying *no deals with Satan*. A couple of students looked over at me, but having the phone out diminished their interest, and I went ahead and finished it out loud, getting it right again and again as I made my way to class.

As a precaution, I kept my phone to my ear as I walked into the room, but managed to stay quiet. I told my students something came up and I was sorry for being a little late. I hadn't prepared a lesson plan, but figured I'd come up with something while they responded to a journal prompt: *Write about how your opinions on major historical events were formed. Parents? Mainstream media? Think in terms of specific issues. Elaborate.*

They started into it. To minimize my anxiety, I focused on the computer screen up at the podium and looked at pictures of Puget Sound. Since I'd moved to Spokane eight

months earlier, I increasingly missed the smells and colors of the maritime world. At first it wasn't so bad. I immersed myself in my graduate work and briefly dated another student from my program. But of late, I'd been thinking about home a lot, so I figured some pictures would comfort me. There was a photo of the Everett Marina in particular that, for a minute, took me completely away. I hoped I'd be able to see Dad's boat, but it was an aerial, and the tops of all the bare masts were indistinguishable. Still, you could see the breakwater that we'd passed along the last time we went out together, when we'd gone crabbing the previous August, a couple weeks before he killed himself.

That day, there was no wind as we left the dock, so we didn't set sail. Rather, we motored out close to Whidbey Island and shut off the engine where we still had a view of the Olympic Mountains. It was warm and the sun occasionally disappeared behind cumulus clouds that dripped mild rain. Dad said it wasn't Seattle weather, but Seattleite weather, because it was passive aggressive. We threw over the pots, then sat out on the deck and drank a couple Rainiers, talking about the Mariners' spiraling season.

"You'll never win if you never score a run, doesn't matter how good your pitching is," he said, keeping his eyes focused on writing in the boat's log.

"But their pitching is pretty damn good."

"Still, best thing that'll happen is you'll play a nothing to nothing extra innings game until the players start to die off."

We went back and forth about the merits of offense versus defense for a while before pulling the pots up. We hauled in a few keepers and got the water boiling. Usually, I was a vegetarian, but made exceptions for excursions like this. Still, I asked Dad to not throw them in alive.

“You gotta kill ‘em then,” he said.

“Come on, Dad.”

“Hey, you always say, if you’re man enough to eat meat, you should be man enough to kill the animal.”

“I don’t say ‘man enough,’ I say ‘willing.’”

“Either way, you don’t want to be a hypocrite.”

I actually didn’t really care if I was.

“Mallet’s in the deck box,” he said.

I grabbed it and pulled the first crab out onto the cockpit floor, then kneeled and struck it above the eyes, before tearing off the shell and ripping the body in half. The legs still moved, but I figured it was dead enough for cooking. I did the same with the others and we ate them out on the deck with melted butter. As we finished, a breeze picked up, and the wind vane atop the mast showed the direction was favorable, but we left the sail covers on and motored back to the marina, talking a bit about my imminent move to Spokane.

As the students moved along with their journaling, I looked at my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed a call. It just said, May 8th, 10:17 a.m. A student in the back looked up at me, chin held up by her palm, and asked what she should do if she was done.

“Elaborate,” I said.

She said she already did.

“Then just hang tight for a minute.”

I saw that students were finishing sooner than I wanted them to, and thought about how early I could comfortably let them out after already having missed a few days

that quarter. The thing about students that have nothing to do is they either look at their phones or they look at you. In my syllabus, I used bold print to emphasize that no personal electronics were to be out in class. A few of them still tried to be coy about it, holding their phones under their desks, but for the most part they just sat there, looking from me to the window to me to the clock to me. So I told them I wasn't feeling well and to go ahead and leave if they were finished, but to make sure they were prepared to discuss their responses tomorrow.

Within a few minutes they were all gone. I sat in the empty room, looking at more pictures of home until students for a different instructor's class started to show up near the top of the hour. Fortunately, my cubicle was right down the hall from my classroom. During my office hour, I tried to plan the next day's lesson, but kept thinking about the test results, so I went back to looking at pictures of the Seattle area, and pulled up a few of the Pike Place Market. One in particular took me back to a memory with Megumi, my sometimes girlfriend over the previous decade.

In an alleyway just outside the Market, there's a gum-covered brick wall. It's been deemed the world's most unhygienic tourist attraction, but is actually rather beautiful, a sort of collaborative Pollack in Technicolor. Twelve years earlier, during senior year of high school, I'd walked there with Megumi. We'd picked up a bag of Jelly Bellys from a candy shop in the Market and sat on a ledge next to the gum wall, dropping the beans one at a time into each other's mouth, before guessing the flavor.

"Juicy Pear," she said.

"Wrong. Green Apple."

"Bullshit. Is not. But now I want to try a Green Apple, so fish it out. "

I picked through the bag and found one, then set it on her tongue.

“Ew, tastes like sweetened butthole wax,” she said laughingly. She pulled it out of her mouth and tried to stick it to the wall.

“It’s not gum, it’s not going to stick, genius,” I said.

“Will too.”

After chewing it up a little more and pressing it to the wall a few more times, it stuck. “Persistence pays off,” she said.

Though she’d moved away years ago, we remained close, especially so since Dad died, and I’d talked to her often on the phone about him, while doing what I could to keep my other issues hidden. I was to meet her in Seattle for a short visit in a few weeks, which was the main reason I had gone through with the test. I wanted to know with certainty that I was clean, in case things rekindled.

After a while, I checked my phone for the call again, and again nothing. I wanted to find a comfortable place where all I had to do was sit and wait for it to ring, somewhere that I didn’t have to worry about getting my prayer wrong as I moved around. My office hour wasn’t quite over, but I decided to walk out to the nearest private location.

About a hundred yards from my building there was a Ponderosa pine grove, and I figured that would be as good a place as any. I left about ten minutes early and again held my phone to my ear just in case, since some of my colleagues were in their offices. I kept the prayer inside my head though, and even managed to carry forward while saying hello to another graduate instructor. Once I got to the lawn in front of the grove, there was nobody else around, so I went ahead and said it out loud because I didn’t want to worry

about going back to redo it at all. I just wanted to be still and wait. There was a little clearing between the trees and I lay down on my back, looking up at the blue sky.

A couple of squirrels ran around in the canopy and jumped from one tree to another. I watched them and continued my saying in my lowest voice possible, feeling like I had control over it, which made me want to break it down and analyze it, but I just kept saying it instead: *For the love of God and Jesus and not Satan, no deals with Satan.* There was a moment where I wondered if it was right to refer to God and Jesus separately, as I didn't fully understand the idea of the Trinity, and I thought maybe I should use the term Lord instead. I'd taken a religious studies class in college, but had never actually gone to church. It's not that my parents weren't religious at all, but my mom's side had abandoned the Catholic Church after they kicked out her sister for marrying a man who'd been previously married. Dad grew up some kind of Protestant, though he never much talked about it. I only remember it being brought up once, on our way home from a Little League game. We'd played an exhibition game against a youth group team, which had gathered for a prayer following the final out. Dad and I got into the van, while I watched them.

"Kind of weird, huh?" he said.

"Are they praying because they lost?"

Dad laughed.

"Maybe. I imagine they pray for lots of reasons."

"Like what?"

"Oh, big things, small things, love, happiness."

We pulled out of the parking lot, as he threw another handful of sunflower seeds into his mouth.

“Then why don’t we pray?”

“You certainly can if you want. I did when I was your age— just kind of stopped when I grew up.”

“Why?”

He spit some shells out the window.

“I guess at some point I started feeling like I should be able to handle my business all on my own,” he said. “Really though, try it out if you want.”

“But I don’t even know how to.”

“You just find a quiet place, put your hands together like you saw some of those kids doing, and say what you hope will happen in life and what you’re thankful for.”

I considered that a good enough explanation, and for the next few months I often prayed before I went to sleep, but after a while, noticing that nothing was happening or changing as a result, I stopped. Through my teens I didn’t think much about the big questions, but when I got to college I started reading Vonnegut and figured humanism was the most morally sound belief system. I even joined the Atheist Collective of The Evergreen State College, and often set up a table in the student center where I gave out buttons that said *Imagine No Religion*. It was easy to write off religion at that age, before ever having fully considered my own death, but as I reached my mid-twenties, I became what I called an I-don’t-knowist. I thought that, in the same way a dog can’t comprehend algebra, perhaps it is beyond a human’s mental capacity to understand the origins of the universe and the fate of our existence. And now here I was, approaching thirty, with this

prayer creeping into my life as a way to try to control what felt outside my ability to manage.

This wasn't the first day I'd said the prayer. It took shape when Dad died, just a few weeks before I started graduate school. For the first several months I didn't say it much. It wasn't until I started worrying that I'd contracted HIV that I began to say it regularly in certain situations, like when I walked in or out my front door, or when the clock hit midnight and a new day began. After getting tested, it became more and more a constant, repeating inside my head until the day it started leaking out; the day I waited for the results.

I sat in the pine grove and wondered if my prayer was arranged appropriately. But, altering it would only increase the risk of getting it wrong so I decided to keep it the same. An hour of muttering and watching my phone passed. I thought about heading home. It would've been the most comfortable place to wait, but there would be so many obstacles along the way, that I figured it best to stay still in the grove.

Forty-five minutes later, my phone vibrated showing an unfamiliar number. My prayer got louder as it buzzed. On the third ring, I answered, but held my hand over the phone as I finished a final time through my prayer before speaking into the phone. I told the lady I was me and she told me she was from the clinic. I positioned the phone in a way that allowed me to listen while not doing my prayer directly into it.

"I'm calling about your HIV test."

I held the phone even further from my mouth.

"Is this Grant Everson?"

I adjusted the phone to respond to her.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I’m calling about your HIV test and to let you know that the results were negative.”

I was so excited, but at the same time I wanted to get my first prayer after hearing the news exactly right.

“What’s that?” she asked.

I finished it perfectly.

“Nothing. Thank you so much. Can you just tell me one more time that the results were negative, just so I know for sure.”

“Yes, they were negative.”

“So no chance I have it whatsoever?”

“Not unless you’ve had a more recent exposure. The blood test is considered conclusive.”

I knew I shouldn’t press.

“Like how recent?”

“If you feel like you’ve been at-risk, you can come back in and talk to a doctor. All I can tell you is your test came back negative.”

I thanked her again and hung up. As I walked out of the grove, I told myself that I could ease up on the prayer, but at the same time I felt so thankful that it seemed like I should keep it going out of gratitude. I made my way across campus to the bus stop, keeping it all in my head and not going back at all, though I did stop in the square for a minute, where I found a bench and told myself that everything was better now. On the

ride home, I pulled out my book and decided that, for now, I'd only say the prayer in especially important situations.

This wasn't my first go-round with fearing a disease, but it was the most intense. This time was triggered by a fling with a nursing student that I met on a Wednesday afternoon at The Swamp, a dive bar down the street from my apartment. After teaching, I went there specifically because I'd recently cut out liquor, and they served only beer and wine. I wouldn't say I was a regular there, but I went often enough that the staff knew my name. For an hour I was the only customer, and chatted with the bartender about the recent legalization of gay marriage. He said it was only a symbolic accomplishment because marriage was an inherently discriminatory institution, and he didn't understand why gays, or anyone else, would want anything to do with it, aside from saving on taxes. I told him fuck it; it's a chance to have a party to celebrate love, which was enough to make it worth it. He took a call on his cell phone and I found a crossword puzzle. A few more lone drinkers walked up and sat at the bar. A lady came in and sat next to me. She had light brown hair and wore a purple sundress with a white sun hat. I finished my beer, and decided to have another. The bartender brought me mine after pouring her glass of house Chardonnay.

"You know Rainier's brewed in California now, don't you?" she asked.

I spun the bottle around and looked at the mountain on the label.

"Yeah, but it's still northwestern to me."

"Sucker for a label, huh?"

"Maybe just a tad nostalgic."

“Because you’ve been drinking it for decades, right?”

“I have been actually. My dad gave me my first sip when I was six.”

We exchanged names and professions. She, Danielle, was studying nursing and working as a medical assistant at a walk-in clinic and seemed unimpressed by my grad instructor status, as she asked no questions about it. The topic shifted to why we were at the bar alone on a Wednesday afternoon. She said she got stood up by her invisible friend and pulled the crossword toward herself, looking it over.

“Oh come on,” she said. “You don’t know who played Bond in ‘Octopussy?’”

I shook my head and told her I wasn’t much of a movie buff.

She grabbed my pen and filled in the boxes as she spelled aloud, “M-O-O-R-E.”

We worked on it together over a couple more drinks until we got stuck in a corner.

“I swear the capital of Tibet is Lhasa,” I said.

“It doesn’t fit though.”

“But I know this.”

“Fuck it,” she said. “Let’s grab another one and go out for a smoke.”

I ordered the round and we went onto the back patio. It had gotten dark and we sat in a couple plastic chairs next to the bronze fire pit. There were a few other folks there and she borrowed a lighter from one of them before offering me a cigarette. I took it and flashed back to a few years earlier when I quit smoking because it gave me anxiety. Stimulants as a whole didn’t sit well with me, and I’d even stopped drinking coffee because it made me fixate on any sensations I felt in my body. While I hadn’t had a

cigarette since I'd quit, it seemed like she didn't give me a choice. She lit hers and then mine, then asked if I smoked weed too. I told her I kept a little around.

"Not a regular though, huh?"

"I guess it depends on what you mean by regular."

"Shut the fuck up. You know what I mean, grad student."

I laughed.

"So," she said, "weed's not your favorite. What is?"

"I pretty much just stick to the beers."

"Boring."

"What? What's wrong with beer?"

"Boring."

"So what's your super exciting favorite drug?"

She exhaled and put a foot on the fire pit's ledge.

"I've only done it a few times, but it's heroin. Definitely heroin."

"Of course it is."

"Fuck off."

"And what's so great about it, aside from the rock star emulation?"

"It's like having an orgasm in every follicle of your skin."

"Oh, come on, I critique essays all day, remember? I know overstatement when I see it."

"You should try it for yourself."

"I'm not a big fan of needles."

"You can smoke it. It's not the same though."

I enjoyed the flavor of the cigarette, even though it was a menthol, burning quickly while she told me about the best experience she'd had on heroin.

"It was the last time I did it, about six months ago. I went on a roadtrip up to Vancouver with my ex-boyfriend. We were staying in a private room at this hostel in Gastown and he got all wasted and passed out on the bed before we even left the room to check out the town. So I said fuck him and went out on my own."

She took her foot down from the fire pit's ledge and turned to me.

"Have you ever been with a prostitute?"

"Can't say I have."

"I hadn't either, but I met one outside the hostel. You should. You totally should. Just once. Anyway, I took her back to my room and rolled my boyfriend over to the edge of the bed. The fucker didn't even wake up, which was typical. So I got down with her and then afterward she pulled out her kit and asked me if I wanted any. It was so fucking good. We just curled up, and I remember at some point she left the bathroom sink running, and I listened to it for hours, debating whether it sounded more like a waterfall or a symphony, before finally deciding it was both."

I threw my smoke into the fire.

"I hope I don't scare you," she said.

"No ma'am. You'd make a great saleswoman, you know?"

"Tell me something exciting that you've done."

She pulled a smoke halfway from the pack and held it out to me.

"I'm good for now."

"So what is it? You must've done something interesting before."

“One time I ate French fries with pasta sauce because I was out of ketchup.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, seriously,” I said. “I haven’t lived too crazy of a life.”

She rolled her eyes and said she had to go to the loo. She set her drink on the fire pit’s ledge and told me not to do anything weird to it. I figured there was a real chance that we’d leave together, and debated whether I should. The last time I’d taken someone home from the bar, about six months earlier, I’d tried repeatedly to convince her to take a morning-after pill. But she insisted it was unnecessary because she used an IUD and the pill made her head spin. I spent the next few months obsessed with the idea that she’d show up at my doorstep, and had rehearsed the reasons I’d make a terrible parent. I’m not sure that I would be a terrible parent though. The thought often crossed my mind while I was with Megumi. One night during the summer after high school graduation, we’d parked outside the gate of a beach community. We snuck in and put the last few pieces of driftwood on the small fort we’d been covertly building over the past couple weeks. I’d brought along my baby blanket that my grandma had crocheted. We cleared away the jagged rocks and unfolded the blanket across the floor of the fort, which had a small fire pit and an open roof that would allow us to look at the night sky. I found some small pieces of drift wood to light and we finally lay back in our construction, my arm around her back in adherence with her above-the-belt-for-now policy. We looked up through the gap, but it was a partly cloudy night and we had to wait for moments of clearing before we could be entirely romantic. I said that the Big Dipper, with its handle still covered by clouds, looked like a bucket you’d collect weeds in.

“Wow. You’re so very charming,” Megumi said.

“I do happen to think a weed-free garden is charming.”

She laughed.

“Typical white guy, trying to control everything, especially nature.”

“It’s not about control.”

“Yes it is.”

“No. It’s about trying to make everything as beautiful as possible.”

“Exactly. So it’s about control.”

I lifted my head and turned toward her.

“Whatever, Megumi. You think you’re so pretty just because you have that little Cindy Crawford beauty mark.”

“You mean my festering mole?”

“How did you get that thing, anyway? Some kind of implant?”

“I suppose a sperm and egg had something to do with it.”

“You think it’s hereditary? Your parents don’t have it though. Must be a recessive gene—which is good because that wouldn’t be a good thing if we had a son,” I said.

“What?”

“Just, you know, theoretically.”

I’d wanted to explain myself to her; that I was just kidding, but didn’t want to be told that she wasn’t interested in having children with me, so I changed the subject. We talked about the sailboat we’d get someday and the road trip we’d take to Big Sur from her new home at college in the Bay Area, as we kept the flames low so as not to draw attention.

Danielle came back and lifted her glass of Chardonnay from the fire pit's ledge, pulling her chair closer to me.

"You could've been a gentleman and moved this to a place where it would've kept chilled," she said.

I told her I was still learning how to be chivalrous, to which she said that it didn't take chivalry to be thoughtful. I was drunk, and wanted to believe that there would be nothing to worry about if I went home with her, and convinced myself that any reservation I felt was only my tendency to overreact. I went to the bathroom and when I came back there were two shots of port sitting on the ledge.

"Since there's no liquor here," she said.

We took them and she drove us to her apartment, which she was aching to get back to so she could pack a bowl. We smoked and kissed and I wore a condom, but when I pulled out at the end I saw that it had torn open. In the morning I sought assurance that she was clean, and even asked directly.

"Yeah, probably," she said.

We exchanged numbers and I walked outside. At that point, my concerns still felt faint and distant, like seeing a flashing light atop a shoal on a clear horizon.

2.

On the night Dad died, Mom called me to say that he'd left her a worrisome message, and that his phone seemed to be turned off when she tried to call him back. She said his message was hard to understand, that he sounded drunk, and kept saying he was sorry. They'd been separated for about eight months and he'd been staying on the boat, a place she'd avoided since their split. She asked me if I'd go to the marina to check on him, since his phone was either dead or off, and she didn't want to be down by the water alone after dark. At the time she called I was organizing boxes for my move to Spokane. My apartment was twenty miles south of the marina, but I told her I could drive up and check.

At the marina, seeing his car parked in its spot, I punched in the code to the gate, and walked down the long, narrow dock. It was a calm night, making audible the faint sounds of a television inside a neighboring liveaboard. I stepped onto Dad's boat and saw there was a light on inside. In a hushed voice, I called for him and, getting no response, opened the entry hatch. He wasn't there, but had left the captain's log on the table, opened to the note. It wasn't typical of him to leave the log sitting out, but it wasn't alarming either, so I didn't read it. I called Mom and told her he wasn't there. She said she'd try getting ahold of his drinking buddies, and asked me if calling the police would be overreacting. I told her to give it a little longer because it seemed he'd recently been here and might just be visiting one of his neighbors. I went back down to the cabin and lay on the bed in the V-berth, trying his phone repeatedly. After another short conversation with Mom and still no word on his whereabouts, she reported him missing.

At that point, I still hadn't noticed that the dinghy was gone, and I seemed to have convinced myself that he was merely passed out drunk somewhere—something he'd done more often since the separation.

Shortly thereafter, Mom called again. By the end of the phone call I learned that Dad had rowed the dinghy a mile and a half to the police dock, where he dialed 911 and said there was a body to be recovered, then shot himself.

I don't remember what exactly Mom said or how long we talked. I don't remember crying or screaming or asking why. But then I do remember being off the phone with her and hearing laughter projecting across the water, from some other boat, like sonar waves confirming my location. Looking for my phone to call Megumi, it struck me why Dad had left the log sitting open. He must have left some kind of note. I got up from the bed and grabbed it off the table.

That first time, I didn't absorb much of what was written there. But I've since read the note often, to the point that I sometimes catch myself remembering passages verbatim and, occasionally, arguing with them. Still, I prefer having this relationship with the note over storing it away and risking that it fade into the realm of artifact.

In, it he addresses Mom first:

Annie,

There is still so much I love about the years we had together. I think back to when we first met and the way I felt sitting next to you in class, trying to think of questions to ask you, wanting to ask you about the difference between meiosis and mitosis, but not wanting to sound stupid. But I'm so glad I did ask— and that you didn't know either— because those next years were the best.

Dad rarely talked to me about women, but when I first started dating Megumi he said to me, “Enjoy it now. Don’t bother thinking about where it’s going. Really, now is for enjoying.” I remember politely showing appreciation for his advice while thinking, *Yeah, I know. Of course it is. And I am.* But reading the note showed it wasn’t just some generic fatherly advice he’d given me. Rather, he was speaking from relatable experience.

There was one day in particular that sticks with me—a day that sums up that time in our lives. It was an afternoon in May, the two of us walking around Ballard. You were wearing a purple sun hat and yellow dress with your octopus earrings. We paraded from bar to bar, drinking and holding hands and stopping below lilacs to kiss and break away sprigs of blooms that you tucked behind your ears. You said you were going to take a couple of those sprigs back to my apartment to tuck inside my smelly pillowcase, and you did. That day, those days, bloomed.

And even as the following decades brought a decline, I tried my best to not let it affect you and Grant. Despite the simple routines of daily living becoming difficult, and a kind of fear growing more and more suffocating, I feel like I did what I could to make things work.

During a trip through the San Juans a couple months before he died, Dad left me alone on board, asking me to make sure the anchor didn’t drag while he rowed the dinghy ashore to look for a campsite. It was a bit windy, blowing 15 or 20 knots, and when I triangulated our position a second time it seemed we’d moved slightly. I wasn’t worried, but followed Dad’s model of recording anything that might indicate a problem. A few hours later, after we’d built a small fire and had a couple beers, he told me it was the right

idea to make note of the anchor dragging, but said he'd prefer I only made entries in the log when he asked.

At dusk, we set the lantern on the picnic table and started a game of cribbage, but I could tell that something continued to distract him. When we'd play, he'd usually try to bet me my watch or joke about how quickly he was going to skunk me. But that time he was more reserved, just playing along, so I asked him if everything was all right.

"Yeah, just got a funny feeling about the anchor is all," he said.

He'd checked on the boat's position every 15 minutes for the past two hours and hadn't seen any sign of dragging.

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said, turning around to toss another log on the fire.

"I'm not worried."

We played another hand. I gained a little ground on his lead, telling him to watch out because I was coming. Without response, he gathered the cards to deal the next round. For a moment the only sound was him shuffling the deck. The cards crackled as they slapped downward, then rustled as he bowed them out and let them fall back into place. I never learned how to shuffle that way.

"So did you read through the log at all while you had it open?" he asked.

I'd lied to Dad before, but this was one of the few times that I wholly felt the dishonesty of doing it.

"No. Why?"

"Just curious, that's all."

I hadn't read much, but had seen enough to get some insight into his state of mind. It was an entry about where he thought he'd dropped a receipt from a marine shop.

He told himself that, in all likelihood, the receipt didn't have his full credit card number, so it didn't matter. The entry ended with a reiteration that identity theft was another thing that he didn't need to worry about. I was surprised to see something like that in the log, but adhered to our conversational boundaries, and never brought it up afterward.

His address to Mom closes in a way that for the next several months left me feeling conflicted about whether I should show it to her:

Maybe I could've done more to seek your help with all of it. Maybe not. In a way, I wonder if you could've done more to acknowledge my condition. I often do feel like you think I'm just moody, and that all I have to do is simply stop being that way. Regardless, I don't at all blame you for any of it.

I like to think that there's a chance I'll see you again on the other side, but doubt that I will. I wish you a joyful, fulfilling life.

Love,

Me

He goes on to address me on the next page:

Grant,

If I felt like I had any other possible fate, I would try for it. For years, you made my life feel purposeful. Then you made it feel salvageable—particularly the time you spent with me out on Doc.

Dad originally bought the boat from some French-Canadian guy, and while the name Danseuse remained painted across the hull, Dad preferred to call her Doc. When I was nine, shortly after we'd gotten the boat, the two of us went out on the bay and tied up at a jetty not far from the marina. He lit the little barbecue and we roasted corn on the cob and hot dogs. After we ate, he asked me to pick out a book to read to him. I went down to the shelf in the cabin and came back up with a copy of *The Lorax*.

"Dr. Seuss again, pal?" he asked.

"Nope, we're on the boat so his name is Dr. *Dan*-Seuss."

Dad laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Well, that's the boat's name from now on," he said.

Those days out on the water were my retreat, and I cherished them. I still cherish them. But over the last year those days out began to feel more like an escape. And for the last few months, haven't even felt like that.

I want you to know that I do appreciate your willingness to be there for me, and that I feel like maybe I should've been more open to your offers of help. Sometimes I think about how all those conversations over the years about baseball and boating might've been failed attempts to talk about something deeper, like the problems you might've been dealing with.

During childhood, I sometimes exhibited compulsive behaviors, and while Dad wasn't unaware of them, it did seem that he saw them as more quirky than problematic. Or, if he did see them as problematic, he chose not to acknowledge them as such. In fairness though, my compulsions back then had no real impact on my quality of life, and

felt like little more than superstitions. One such behavior, which arose at age eleven, was jumping up to touch the door frame of any room I entered, and if I missed the frame when I jumped, I'd have to walk back and jump again. Dad tended to be amused by this, but I remember one time when he seemed on the cusp of talking to me about it in a concerned way. After we'd gone out to Sunday dinner at the Golden Corral's buffet, I came home and lounged on the couch, full of meatloaf and cornbread and frozen yogurt. At bedtime, Dad watched me saunter to my room and jump up toward the frame, swatting the air.

"It's okay, pal. Don't bother giving it another shot," he said. "Just go to bed."

I jumped and missed again.

"Really," he said.

I walked over to my bed and crawled under the blankets. He tucked me in and told me not to worry so much about it, then left the room. I felt so heavy that I didn't bother getting up to try again, and felt the urge slowly fade before falling asleep.

I want you to know that, while it may seem that I've given up, I feel like I have only done so in the same way a person succumbs to any illness. I fought it until I couldn't.

All the love,

Dad

After reading this for the first time, I tried calling Megumi, but she didn't pick up. I did get ahold of my childhood friend Joel, who said he'd come pick me up and drive me

over to Mom's. As I waited for him, I looked through the ten or so pages in the log that preceded the note. Everything that'd been written was scribbled out, vigorously, but it was still clear to me that on those pages Dad had drafted and redrafted what he ultimately chose to say. Joel arrived and I carried the log with me off the boat.

3.

In the two weeks leading up to seeing Megumi, I tried to focus on pulling it together, telling myself that there was no reason to prevent the possibility of rekindling things in the same way we had, off and on, over the past decade. I hadn't said the prayer aloud since I got the test results, and only said it inside my head when a new day started and when I walked in and out of my apartment door. It was like I was beginning to believe in my ability to control my destiny again.

The plan for the weekend was that I would catch a ride to Seattle with a classmate of mine who was heading there for a concert. I'd spend two nights at Megumi's parents' house in the city, while also visiting Joel and Mom in the suburbs, before I caught a ride back to Spokane. Mom had offered to let me stay at her place, but it felt like she'd done so out of obligation. The guy she'd been seeing before Dad died was now living in her apartment, and I had no desire to be there. But we decided to meet for lunch when Megumi and I were on our way to the boat to go through the rest of Dad's things. Dad's brothers had cleaned out his storage unit soon after he died, but the inside of the boat had

remained untouched in the nine months since. I knew I would find more of his personal writing in the boat's older logs, and hoped that the emotional gravity of the situation would excuse any strange behaviors that I exhibited around Megumi.

A week before our planned meeting, I was walking from my apartment to the grocery store to pick up some eggs for breakfast. Halfway there, I felt like something pricked me in the foot. I stopped and looked down at the sidewalk, but didn't see anything initially, so I kept walking. At the store, opening the cartons and checking for cracks and blemishes, I couldn't stop thinking about it. That stinging feeling in my foot. I tried to reassure myself, saying inside my head that there was nothing to worry about because it would've been obvious if I'd been pricked by anything, especially a needle. But as I browsed the wines, I increasingly felt like I had to go back and make sure there wasn't a syringe at that spot on the sidewalk. I went to the checkout with only the eggs. The express line was longer than I wanted it to be and I considered putting the eggs back, but instead told myself to just focus on the store's music, which was something from the fifties, but I kept thinking about how I needed to get back to that spot on the sidewalk quickly so that I could know there wasn't a syringe there before someone else might come along and move it. I thought about what exactly it felt like when I took that step. Nothing stuck to my shoe, but I did feel a prick and the soles on my shoes were thin and cracked, so whatever it was could have poked through and pierced my foot, and then fallen out with my next step. I'd been meaning to take them to a shoe repair place, and wished I'd just gone and done it instead of being cheap as usual. The shoes had been Dad's, and, aside from a mint-condition Pendleton jacket, they were the only attire of his that I would wear. I first tried them on two months after he died, and then wore them

almost every day thereafter. They were suede, Italian-made, with a one inch heel. I'd admired them on the rare occasions that he'd worn them over the years, and had long meant to get a pair for myself. And if I'd worn them only for special events, keeping them pristine like he had, I might not now be in this predicament.

I considered possibilities that were more likely than a syringe. Maybe it was just a nerve firing, but that would've been a strange thing to notice; or perhaps a rock in my shoe or a thorn in my sock. Standing in line, the need to check inside my shoe to be sure nagged at me. I assessed the three people in front of me. They were all looking forward, their attention on the clerk and his ability to get them through. I looked back. A twenty-something walked up behind me. I'd just put my eggs on the conveyor belt and there wasn't yet enough room for his items. If I moved the eggs forward a bit, creating space for him, he might be more inclined to think it was no big deal if I took off my shoe and examined its insides. I pushed the eggs up and set a divider behind them. He said thanks and began to unload onto the belt. I took off my shoe and started to turn it upside down to shake it out, but realized I wanted to be able to look closely at whatever might be in there in case somehow the tip of a syringe had broken off inside. So I instead kept my shoe upright, using my hand to rake the insole, slowly, in a way that a needle wouldn't pierce my finger if it came into contact, but I felt nothing. I put my shoe back on and moved up in line, nobody seeming to have noticed anything strange about me. If a needle had pierced my foot, even just barely, the spot would still be irritated. I was tempted to again take off my shoe, along with my sock, to examine the area where I'd felt the prick, but it was almost my turn to check out. I stepped up to the clerk. He wore an arm brace and moved slowly. I told him my day was fine and that I didn't need a bag and that I was sure

I didn't need a bag because it was just a short walk to my apartment. He smiled and handed me the eggs.

A couple blocks down, I was confident that I'd found the spot where I'd felt it. At first glance, I didn't see anything there, and told myself it was fine. But I wanted to be sure, and felt the need to look closely for even a fragment of a needle, knowing that it only took the tip of the syringe to transmit disease. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. Across the street, a lady watered her hanging fuchsias, but her back was to me. About 20 yards up the sidewalk, it appeared that a kid was burning ants with a magnifying glass, or maybe just looking at them. The occasional car passed. I waited for a lull in the traffic to lean down and look. The sun was out and a fleck on the ground appeared metallic, glistening in the way a needle fragment might. Reaching to the ground, I cautiously rubbed my finger over it, feeling nothing sharp. I tried to pick it up, but it didn't budge, and I became confident that it was part of the sidewalk. As I took a last look, I could feel the compulsion alleviate.

I made it home, feeling more at ease, but still vulnerable to another such episode. I heated up some oil and cracked an egg into it, then took a seat at the table, listening to the crackling and thinking about what it was exactly that I'd felt back at the store. It was like the part of my brain that permitted peace of mind had become caged and deadbolted, and the only way to unlock it was to cave to the compulsion until it dissipated.

Over the next few days, in anticipation of my visit with Megumi, I worked hard to keep the new fear at bay. In all the time she'd known me, she never seemed to have picked up on any of my compulsions. But it felt different now, like they were actually shaping my life, rather than accenting it.

The first one I can recall, at age nine: playing basketball I'd follow a specific routine before shooting a foul shot. I'd bounce the ball four times, and then spin it in my hands four times, adding up to my lucky number: eight. At age eleven, there were the doorways. Then during junior high I had a period where I avoided doing anything three times because two out of the three times I did it equaled 66.6 percent. For example, if I knocked on a door three times, and there were similarities between two of the knocks that weren't shared with the third, then entering that house became associated with the devil. But I eventually got over the compulsion when I realized that 666 was different from 66.6, and so long as there was that decimal, I was fine. I never even stopped to think that two-thirds actually equaled an infinite amount of sixes. For me, there were always just the three.

During senior year of high school, when I first befriended Megumi, my compulsions were largely dormant, but I had developed a fear of the number 13—typical, I know. That May, she and I were driving to the lake for a swim when I had to stop for gas. I'd been thinking about professing my feelings for her and was already on edge when we stopped. She insisted on putting some money in my tank because I'd given her several rides of late. Despite my protests, she ran inside the station and prepaid ten dollars, then came back out and told me to just sit back and relax while she pumped. I watched from inside the car, looking back and forth between her and the pump's digital register, hoping that the number of gallons didn't add up to thirteen. Her hair was falling out of its bun, and the number rose, her tank top sleeve was slunken off her shoulder, and the number rose, her swimsuit strap was yellow, the number stopped. When added up, 8.131 equaled 13. Megumi stuck the pump back in its holder. She stepped into the car

and I had to step out of it, telling her I needed to check on one of the tires. I quickly assessed the situation and figured I could, in one fluid motion, grab a paper towel from the nearby dispenser, reach down to pull the pump's trigger just enough to change the number of gallons on the register, then wipe up the gas that would spill, as I feigned checking the tire. I went for it, but the transaction had completed, and no gas would pump. Through her window, I told Megumi that I wanted to put a couple more bucks in the tank to be sure we had enough for the way back from the lake. But she insisted we had far more than enough, which we did, and then asked why I was being weird.

“Are you planning on kidnapping me and driving me off to some hidden bunker or something?”

“No hidden bunker. I was thinking more like a white sand beach in Mexico.”

“I don't know. How about we start with the brown sand beach of Lake Goodwin.”

I started the car, the numbers still totaling 13, and I knew it was the wrong day to tell her how I felt.

Now, as I walked each day from my apartment to the bus stop to my classroom and back, I often felt a sensation in my foot, and if there was the slightest uncertainty about it, I'd have to stop to check the ground, sometimes pretending to tie my shoe as I looked. At times, it almost felt comical, and I thought about how if I was someone watching me, I might laugh. And in one instance, another graduate instructor came up to my desk, smiling, and asked what was going on out there. She'd watched me from her cubicle window as I checked a spot in the grass field that I often cut through to get to our building. I wasn't sure how much she'd seen, but it was something of a drawn-out

episode. About three-quarters of the way through the field, it felt like what could've been a needlepoint poked my foot, causing a sharp, quick pain. At first, I truly believed it was nothing and continued walking to my cubicle, my foot feeling fine, nothing stuck in my shoe. But with each step forward, what had felt like certainty slipped toward possibility.

I hadn't noted the exact spot where I'd felt it, so I went back to what I thought might be the right location and looked down, seeing nothing. Worse, grass covered the ground thickly enough that if there was a needle it might not be visible. So I reached down, tearing up handfuls and tossing them aside until I could see down to the dirt. I did this in a few spots, stopping when I thought anyone might be watching. The feeling didn't fade. I stood up and assessed the area, taking note of the entire section I'd need to check through to be sure, about five square feet, and worked methodically through the designated area, looking closely. Some of the grass roots were above ground, and had a thin, clear appearance, resembling what I thought could be the end of a needle. I touched them to make sure they were soft and malleable. Finally, I reached the end of the area, and the compulsion alleviated. It felt like addiction; my muscles relaxing, my nerves deflating, the cage unlocking—a step forward now possible.

"I dropped my neighbor's house key," I said. "I'm watching her cat. Knew I should've put it on my ring."

"You looked pretty intense out there, like you'd come to an X on a treasure map or something."

I laughed it off.

"You know cat people," I said. "Their pets are their children."

"But you found it?"

“I did.”

She left my cubicle and I decided I’d have to reroute my daily routine to avoid certain terrains that were more likely to generate an episode.

The closer I came to seeing Megumi, the more the compulsions intensified. I’d put in a lot of effort over the past week to feel certain that I hadn’t been exposed to anything that could be passed along to her, even now steering clear of grass and gravel. But I knew that while with her I’d have to balance my vigilance with normalcy. The day before I left for Seattle, I debated going to the park next to my house to practice walking on the terrains I’d been avoiding, and tried to reason sensibly whether that was a good idea. If I did go out to walk on grass and gravel I would put myself at risk of having an episode. In all likelihood, if I was exposing myself to such terrain, I *would* have an episode. But the idea with the walk was that I’d go with the specific intention of being able to carry forward after feeling an imaginary needle prick, and then would try to convince myself that there was nothing to worry about before the compulsion overwhelmed me.

I decided that, no matter what, I would keep walking, making my way back home without stopping. If when I got home the compulsion persisted, only then would I allow myself to go back to the park and look. The risk with this was that if I didn’t immediately check, I might worry that in the time I was gone the syringe or needle fragment might’ve been removed from the spot, thus disallowing the certainty that there hadn’t been one there, and consequently leaving a blood test as the only option to assure that I hadn’t been exposed. I wasn’t sure that this was a worthy risk. Instead, I considered a better approach might be to focus on the exact, physiological feeling in my foot. What would it actually

feel like for my foot's skin to be pierced? If I could know this, concretely, then maybe it would be easier to overrule any compulsions. My first thought was to step on a tack, but I realized that a tack doesn't have the same shape as a needle, so I figured that, for better accuracy, I should go to the walk-in clinic and make up some reason why I needed to get a shot in my foot. Or perhaps I could convince them to give me a syringe to take home. I'd tell them I was allergic to bees, and then I could set the needle on the sidewalk outside my apartment in a way that it had to pierce my shoe before my foot. To know, I'd have to simulate the experience in the most detailed way possible. And if the doctor wasn't convinced I was allergic to bees—I stopped, acknowledging that what I was doing wasn't reasoning, and told myself to shut the fuck up and go for a walk.

At the park's entrance, I sat down on a bench to plot my course. Next to the bench was the start of a gravel trail that ran the length of the park, one city block. Looking down it, it seemed an obtainable goal to walk to the other end. There were some people around, but I told myself that that was a good thing because I could use them as motivation to just keep walking. Ten feet down the path, a lady played fetch with her dog. At twenty feet, a group of men sat at a picnic table, playing cards, their sleeping bags rolled up at their feet. Throughout the grass, blankets were spread here and there, books being read. It was a nice day—the sun's warmth evidencing that it was, in fact, late May.

Before I let myself think too much, I started down the path. I walked, step after step, like I always had. But how had I walked prior to all this? In the past, I was conscious of how I walked only when trying to project a particular mood or characteristic. At the dock on a nice day, slow down and enjoy the company. On a

sidewalk downtown, speed up with eyes straight ahead, intentionally confident. But I never thought about my feet, in any circumstance. Even in the shower, I tended to ignore them, figuring it was good enough that the soap rolled down my legs and onto them.

I walked, unable to not think about my feet, but continuing forward, passing the lady and her dog. I actually noticed the guys at the picnic table more than they did me, as only one of them looked in my direction, and did so with indifference. Halfway down the trail, a Ponderosa pine grove blocked the sun and I remember stopping, not to check for anything, but to remind myself that the madrona was my favorite tree. The madrona is a coastal tree, and I've always loved the way it leans out over cliffs above rocky beaches, as if it's not yet compelled to jump, and because it stays grounded its patches of smooth, molted, red bark are often engraved with the names of lovers and the dates documenting when the love was present. It is much more difficult to carve your name into a Ponderosa, with its clumped, knotted bark; and in a park with plenty of graffiti, the pines were left unscathed. Thirty feet from the end of the path I felt a sensation, and slowed, but didn't stop, repeating inside my head that it would be obvious if something stabbed me. I kept walking and came up on a middle-aged man sitting at a bench, looking downward toward his folded hands and muttering to himself. He wore cutoff jean shorts and a pocketed tee shirt, his hairline receding, with graying curls falling just short of his shoulders. I thought I'd seen him before. He looked up, cleared his throat, and asked me if I knew what time it was. My impulse was to just keep walking. Without stopping, I pulled my phone from my pocket.

"3:30."

"Exactly?" he asked.

“3:27.”

He looked back down to his hands and continued muttering. I slowed and listened intently, trying to discern what he was saying. I wanted to ask. Beyond that, a part of me felt an urge to know him. I wondered if we might relate, but was also afraid that we would. I stopped and looked back to him.

“I heard they’re going to start doing concerts in the park here soon, for the summer. Have you heard anything about that?”

He kept his eyes downward, paused the muttering, and cleared his throat.

“No.”

I took it he didn’t want to be bothered. But perhaps the perception that he was unapproachable had become so ingrained in his head that he’d accepted it now, and embodied the designation, resignedly, despite some persisting desire to connect.

“Maybe I’ll see you here if there are.”

I continued, thinking more about him than my feet. Upon reaching the end of the trail, I considered walking it again to get home. I felt good about my accomplishment and had a fragile confidence that I could do it again, which would also give me another chance to interact with the man on the bench. Still, I had to weigh the risk against the reward. I didn’t want to push my luck and decided it best to walk home on the sidewalk, trusting its smooth surface and inability to hide anything.

That night, I lay for hours in my bed thinking about the next day. I hadn’t seen Megumi since she flew out for Dad’s service, and I hoped we’d be able to spend time together in a way more reminiscent of the lighter years before. My thoughts, for hours, triangulated between anxiety that I’d have an episode in front of her, reassurances that I

had control over my behavior, and anticipation of the familiarity of her. My eyes closed and opened and closed. Even with them shut, the darkness wasn't complete, as the light of my lamp glowed inside my eyelids, like bioluminescence on a deep sea dive. I pulled the comforter up over my face. At some time between two and four o'clock, it was clear that the anticipation had grown into excitement.

Jason and I left at noon, after a class we had together. I didn't teach on Fridays and, as we got on the road in his mid-90s Mustang, I remembered what it felt like to look forward to the measured liberation of a weekend. We passed by the wheat fields and irrigation combines in the desert west of Spokane, small talking about our program. I hadn't become especially close to any of my classmates, but Jason and I had often ended up at the Swamp together during our first few months in town. We never talked in-depth about our personal lives, and I hadn't told him the story with Dad or that I'd be going to the boat the next day, but we had grown somewhat familiar with each other's backgrounds. He grew up Mormon in rural Nevada, and then went off to college at Brigham Young. He'd begun growing skeptical of the church while an undergrad, but it wasn't until a stint teaching English in Nicaragua in his mid-twenties that he shed his customs and became a debaucher. Now in Spokane, he was the only classmate who would reliably drink with me. He was headed to Seattle to meet a girlfriend for a Radiohead concert, and continuously played their albums on the drive over. We descended into the Columbia River gorge, debating the truthfulness of rumors about a professor and a classmate of ours who'd been seen out together a few times.

"You know who I *haven't* seen out on the town lately?" Jason asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, where the fuck have you been?”

“Bucklin’ down, man. Trying to not blow all my money on drinking, finally starting to spend time on my thesis project.”

“That or this girlie’s got you all domesticated, spending every night on the phone with her.”

After getting tested for HIV, I’d avoided Jason because I was afraid to spend time with someone who spoke often about his skepticism of Jesus’ life and teachings. The fear still existed now, but on the periphery, far enough away that I could be in his company. For some reason, the fact that he’d been Mormon, rather than a traditional Christian, made it easier to digest.

“No, we’re just old pals with some puppy love in our past. Really, I’ve been focusing on getting my shit together.”

“Sure you are.”

“Fuck off.”

“So then tell me about this brilliant treatise that’s taking all your time away from the bar.”

Thus far, my thesis work had consisted mostly of thoughts that came and went like minnows. But of late, I’d been drawn to the Situationist movement in 1960s France. In particular, work done by Guy Debord, the movement’s figurehead, regarding what he called psychogeography, which theorized how urban construction influenced behaviors and thought patterns in people as they walked city streets. But I wasn’t sure how my

interest in this could translate to 200 pages of critical work lending original insight into something of historical significance, per the requirement. I didn't want to talk about it.

"You hungry?" I asked.

"I could eat."

"Great. Let's hit a drive-thru."

We stopped in Ellensburg and picked up burritos that we ate in the parking lot. Jason wanted to find somewhere to grab a quick beer, but I told him I had a fifth of Evan Williams in my backpack and to just pull from that. We got back on the road, passing the bottle, and began our ascent into the Cascades. The landscape grew increasingly lush. Amongst the Ponderosas, there was an occasional hemlock, its deep, glossy green contrasting the brightness of the pines. Ferns grew from crevasses in big leaf maples. Quilts of moss and lichens coated trunks and branches. We rose at a steeper grade, and I rolled my cracked window the rest of the way down, the air feeling cool, thick, and fresh—like it had spent the morning with the sea.

At the summit, we pulled over in a gravel lot so Jason could piss in the bushes. I sat in the car, wanting to pee too, but decided not to risk it. Descending into the foothills outside of Seattle, I texted Megumi, whose flight had arrived earlier that morning, to say we were an hour out. She replied, *Get here already!*

Seattle's skyline came into distant view, like a diorama. We pulled off the freeway and a few minutes later arrived at her parents' house, parking one house down on the opposite side of the street. Megumi sat on a porch swing with her mom, not noticing me at first, wearing a yellow sundress and brown cowboy boots. Her parents had moved to Seattle recently from the suburbs and I hadn't yet visited the house. Megumi said

they'd moved to the city because of a shared mid-life crisis, calling the new home their two-bedroom Porsche. It was one-story, with a tall, white magnolia flowering alongside the concrete path that led from the sidewalk to the porch. I ate a stick of gum and decided to say the prayer inside my head.

"Damn. That's her?" Jason asked.

"Looks like it."

In Spokane, between my apartment and the Swamp, there were a number of storefronts available for lease. Sometimes, walking home after five or six drinks during my first few months in the neighborhood, I'd stop and look in the windows, considering possibilities. A gelateria. A bookstore that serves pie to its browsers. A baseball card shop. Then when I'd walk by the same windows on my way to teach in the morning, I'd shake my head at the previous night's ideas. The vacancies seemed intentional, part of a landscape more intent on construction than occupation, dictating where one could not go. Still, the concrete presence of absence creates a desire to fill space. But what do you put there?

During the times we were apart, Megumi often accompanied me in my mind—an idealized version of her influencing my mood and behavior throughout the day. I would put on certain songs or cook a certain meal. Things she liked. In my head, I'd say things about Sam Cooke's falsetto or the best way to roast garlic, and she'd be engaged, connecting with me. It felt like, despite her absence, I was moving toward her presence by practicing ways to charm her. In reality, I impressed no one as I went about this. But it made me feel like her physical vacancy was, in a way, occupied. Often times, I was more

comfortable with this internal, idealized version of her than the person herself. She felt like possibility. But, at the same time, she was a place I could not go.

Seeing her on the porch, unaware of my arrival, the excitement was tempered, as always, by absence. Not only the sense of impending absence that accompanies a short visit, but also, when she was present, my idealized version of her had to disappear. What she said and did was what she said and did. It all felt final. A progression of interactions that couldn't not have happened. Whereas, in my head, I could freely go back over and over things, correcting away all misgivings. If what was said or done wasn't right, it was okay, I could try again until I landed on the right thought.

Looking at her through the windshield, the sun reflecting gently as if off water, the internal her dissolved as the concrete one rose up and waved. I opened the car door and stood, feeling a quick head rush from the whiskey. She ran into the street—arms extending, sundress kicking up, silver hoop earrings shining. I took a step forward and she hugged me with muscle, balling up fistfuls of my shirt.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey.”

She stepped back and squared me up, gripping my biceps.

“You didn't put on sunblock,” she said.

“I'm blushing.”

“Fuck off. You know you need to wear it.”

“That stuff causes cancer.”

“The sun causes cancer,” she said.

“It also causes happiness, and I'd hate to block that out.”

“It’s hard to be happy when your skin’s falling off.”

“Our skin is constantly falling off.”

“Shut up.”

She leaned over and looked through the passenger window at Jason still sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Hey there, thanks for driving his ass over here.”

They exchanged names and Jason asked if he could use the bathroom before going on his way. We walked up to the porch, me keeping a half step behind in case I needed to check the ground. Kiki’s reserved greeting and casual outfit of loose jeans and a Mariners shirt made her daughter seem unrelated. We hugged and I told her I’d been fine and that the magnolia was beautiful. Inside, they’d transported the furniture arrangement from their old home. Retro red sofa at the center of the living room, matching loveseat to the left, marble-top coffee table reachable from both. The white bookshelf was again next to the TV along the back wall, holding classics toward the top, photo albums and high school annuals below. The walls were decorated with the kids’ adolescent art projects—Megumi’s detailed charcoals of Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo juxtaposed against splattered abstracts by her little brother. We passed through into the stainless steel kitchen. Jason found the bathroom and Megumi went to the fridge, saying she was going to make us the best pico de gallo, singling out the ingredients, and setting them on a cutting board.

“What can I get you to drink?” Kiki asked.

“I’m all right.”

“Oh, come on, Grant,” she said, drawing out the vowel in my name, “don’t be shy.”

“Water’s fine.”

“We’ve got lemonade,” Kiki said.

“Even better.”

She lifted a carafe from the fridge, slices of lemon floating on top.

“Where’s papa bear?” I asked.

“Neighborhood association meeting, if you can believe that,” Megumi said.

“Already laying down the law around here, is he?”

“He’d like to think he is,” Kiki said. “Some folks are throwing a fit about boats being parked where they’re visible from the street and he thinks they should shut up about it. I don’t see what the big fuss is either way. They should be talking about something that actually matters.”

“Are you guys getting a boat?” I asked.

“No, sometimes he talks about it though.”

“Funny. I never pictured him out on the water,” I said.

“I think it’d be good for him,” Kiki said, pulling an ice tray from the freezer. “He needs an old man hobby.”

“I could look at what’s for sale up at the marina tomorrow.”

“You don’t need to be worrying about that while we’re up there too,” Megumi said, dicing the onions she’d cut into half-moons.

“There’s no rush,” Kiki said.

“Really, it’s not an inconvenience. I’ll just take a quick look around.”

Jason walked out from the bathroom, saying he'd better get on his way.

"Sure you don't want to stick around for a little snack first? It'll be worth it,"

Megumi said.

Jason pretended he was in deep thought, looking upward and tapping his temple.

"I suppose I could stay another couple minutes."

"Right answer," Megumi said.

Kiki held the ice tray with both hands, bending it downward from each end, a few cubes popping up in the middle. She poured four tall glasses, setting one in front of me. I took a drink.

"That's delicious," I said. "Tastes like the mountain air."

"What?" Megumi asked, pausing the chopping to give me a confused look.

"It's fresh," I said.

"So you two are in the same program?" Kiki asked, handing a glass to Jason.

"We are," he said. "But as you can see, he'd certainly be better off pursuing poetry."

"Clearly," Megumi said, subtly looking up at me with her I'm-just-fucking-with-you smile. I wanted to be able to talk to her away from anybody else.

Jason slapped me on the back.

"No," he said, "this guy's the reclusive genius of our program."

"Reclusive?" Kiki asked, her back turned to us, refilling the ice tray at the sink.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, forcing a laugh and giving him a look.

He took a long drink.

“Damn, that’s good,” he said, nodding. “But you know what we could add to it to make it even better?”

“I think it’s just fine as is,” I said, looking at him squarely.

“You’re right, it is. Tastes like mountain air.”

Kiki opened the freezer and shuffled some things around before returning the ice tray.

“I think that mountain air is actually a good analogy for this lemonade’s freshness,” Megumi said. “I do.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what, I really should actually get on my way,” Jason said. “The lady’s waiting on me, and I’m already late.”

Megumi was putting the finishing touches on the pico de gallo, mixing it all together, adding squeezes of lime juice.

“Aw, all right then,” she said.

“Hey, thanks again for the ride, man.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “If you’re out on the town tonight, give me a shout. The show should be over about midnight. Otherwise, back on the road bright and early Sunday.”

He walked out the door and I imagined him drunkenly blowing a stoplight and hitting a pedestrian in the crosswalk, and I wondered what he’d do. Fleeing might ultimately be the right decision for him. I pictured him getting away with it and reading the victim’s obituary, scoffing at how the services would be held at a church, remarking

that they'd be better off throwing the remains into the woods where the body would at least contribute to the regeneration of life.

Or maybe he would stop to assist, remorsefully, caringly, thus bringing his own life to a halt too. It occurred to me that I hardly knew him.

"Kind of a funny guy, isn't he," Kiki said.

"Sure is," I said.

"Why do you say that, Mom?"

"He just lets it all out there."

Megumi shrugged. "Does he?" she asked.

We ate the chips and pico at the island in the middle of the kitchen, the topic shifting to Kaz, Megumi's little brother, who was working in Los Angeles at a marketing firm, doing well. Kiki walked to the back door to let the cat in and, whispering, I asked Megumi if there was a bar nearby. She smiled and nodded. I rolled my eyes toward the front door. Kiki walked back toward us, the slender cat sauntering alongside, its shoulder blades pronounced, arriving at its food dish.

"I think we're going to head out for a bit, Mom."

"Oh, really? Where to?"

"Just out and about to do a little catching up," Megumi said.

"Nowhere in particular?"

"Nope."

Kiki opened the dishwasher to begin loading. "Will you be back for dinner with us?"

“Yeah, let’s plan on it,” Megumi said. “In fact, maybe we’ll go down to Pike Place and pick up some things.”

“I’ve already got everything for dinner, but how about you figure something out for a dessert.”

Megumi agreed and we got up to leave. Before my first step outside, I told myself that, as I’d done at the park, if I felt a prick to just focus on the exact physiological feeling and then trust my capacity to know whether or not it felt like a needle piercing my foot.

(To be continued)

Three Ties

Marysville, Washington was close enough to the city to offer an escape, but far enough that its residents rarely went there. Thirty miles from the Nutcracker in winter, thirty miles from the folk festival in spring, thirty miles from the aquarium in summer, zero miles from the living room TV in fall. In November, the sound of college football announcers discussing studs and Wildcats filled Trent's apartment. It was a new interest of his that he considered to be an adequate time-filler while he wasn't at work. A few days ago, he watched the Washington Huskies lose again, their rival Oregon again dominating. His old flannel collected salt from his Pringles as the Huskies let the game slip away.

Trent started following high school football too, which provided an excuse to leave the house on Fridays, but also a reason to return before the Tonight Show came on. And after passing out with the TV still on before the first celebrity guest appeared, Trent would, on some nights, dream about sitting in the chair next to Jay Leno, or was it Rosie O'Donnell, or was it---it was---Selma Hayek, again, for the third time in the last week.

"Welcome back to the show, Trent. And congratulations on your promotion."

"Thanks, Selma. I'm really excited about it. And it wouldn't have been possible without all of you."

Trent looked out at the audience, a smattering of co-workers from Royal Slice, the buffet style pizza restaurant that he used to assistant manage, but now fully managed.

“Really? I bet it would’ve been possible without *any* of them,” Selma said.

“Yeah, that might be true. But, you know, they were all such...yeah, that’s probably true.”

“I thought so.”

Trent woke up alone from this dream on the morning of his first day as manager, waited a minute for his erection to subside, and walked to the bathroom while thinking about what to wear to work. As the manager he was now allowed to wear his own clothes, a puzzling problem that left him half-wishing he could just wear the burgundy Slice polo with his embroidered name. He walked into the bathroom and stripped off his Joe Boxer shorts, stepped over the tub wall and turned on the shower. He worked the hot and cold knobs like equalizers on a mixing board, trying to find a balance that would create just the right feeling. As cold turned to hot and too hot turned to lukewarm, and lukewarm turned to chilly, he shut the water off, armpits unscrubbed, hair still dry. He stepped out of the shower and, while standing on the bath mat, turned the water back on, leaned his head in over the tub and under the shower stream, again chilly. He thoroughly lathered. As the soapy water dribbled down from his hair into his eyes, he said he was going to shave his fucking head.

Trent dried off and walked over to his closet. He chose a white button-up and debated which of his three ties should go with it: the navy blue one that his ex-girlfriend gave him, the music-themed one that his mom gave him, or the red one that he’d just bought for himself when he got word of the promotion. After he heard the good news from the Slice’s owner he drove over to JC Penney, picked out a pair of khakis, and spent almost half an hour in the tie section. He ran his hands across candy cane stripes, various

themes (including the Space Needle and Tetris), and solid colors. He threw a green one around his neck, looked in the adjacent mirror, and shrugged when he saw it dangling loosely atop his old flannel. As he put it back on the rack a worker approached him and asked if he had any questions about anything. Trent looked over at her and thought for a moment.

“Just curious, are all of these ties made out of silk?”

“Yeah, I think so. As far as I know, anyway.”

“Wow. So they’re all made from caterpillar cocoons?”

“I’m not sure. I think silk usually comes from a worm.”

Trent thought back to the high school biology course he took a couple of years ago. His teacher, a butterfly enthusiast, kept monarch larvae in the classroom.

“Yeah, but caterpillars are worms, aren’t they?” he asked.

“I guess they could be, except they have feet.”

Trent nodded his head in agreement and told her that he couldn’t decide which tie he wanted.

“Red is nice,” she said.

He said he thought so too and thanked her before she walked off.

The trip to JC Penney was an anomaly for Trent as almost his entire wardrobe was purchased at the thrift store. His few articles that weren’t secondhand came to him as gifts, mostly from Hillary, who’d left him recently for Portland, a couple hundred miles away. On the morning she left, she told him that if he decided to forget about his work and move with her, she’d help him prepare for job interviews, buy him a new dress shirt even, one that he could wear with that tie she’d bought him last year for her great aunt’s

funeral. He told her it was a sweet offer and that he did want to go with her, but had to take advantage of opportunities when they arose. Trent had known he was in the running for manager and told her that it wasn't every day that someone his age had a chance to run a restaurant.

As he looked over the ties in his closet, Trent considered the impression he wanted to make on his first day as manager. Red would be good for adding some brightness, some perk, to the sullen forecast. This was the time of year when clouds snuggled together to brace for the impending winter, and the employees walked with a reflective dreariness. But he also wanted to make himself approachable, and thought the music-themed tie might give his workers a reason to ask him about himself. It was a clip-on with a black background set against a hodgepodge of white clefs and notes, suggesting a relatable interest. His mom gave it to him for the spring concert during his junior year. Mr. Philpott, his band teacher, had decided on Edvard Grieg's "Morning Mood" for the performance and Trent, the only oboe player, spent night after night perfecting the solo.

When school got out on the day of the show, he decided to take a shortcut on his way home through an overgrown grassy field in hope of getting a little extra practice time. Even though it was early in the season, he'd taken an over-the-counter, non-drowsy allergy pill as a precaution. He crossed the field and jogged the last couple of blocks to his mom's house, went down to the basement, and pulled out his sheet music as his eyes started to itch. They continued to itch, and redden. He took another pill, but his eyes started puffing, then swelling. The cold washcloth he laid across his face was soothing,

and mitigated the pollen's effects, but each time he lifted it up his vision remained blurred. He tried to read his sheet music, but the notes looked like sunspots. His mom got home from work, opened the door to the stairwell, and called down to him.

"Hey honey. I got you something for the concert."

He tried to focus on the pages.

"Trent, baby. Are you down there?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I don't think so."

She walked down and saw him sprawled across the loveseat, holding the sheet music inches from his face.

"Oh sweetie, what's going on?"

"Allergies."

"Oh no. Have you taken any pills?"

Trent nodded.

"Shoot. I'll get you something with caffeine. That usually helps. Hold on, I'll grab you one of my Diet Cokes."

Trent's eyesight didn't return to normal until the following morning. He missed his concert and his solo. Apparently, after receiving the news from Trent's mom, Mr. Philpott decided to fill the void himself, putting down the baton and blowing on his old clarinet in a failed attempt to recreate the solo. Trent dragged through band for the rest of the year, then put away his oboe for good. His mom prodded him to pick it back up, but Trent moved further away from band as he got closer to his new interest, Hillary.

Trent introduced Hillary to his mom on a night in late spring. The three of them sat down at his house for a pork chop dinner and talked about the school's Spanish club, where the two of them became friendly a couple of weeks after the concert. Hillary ate the green beans and cut up the pork chops before sliding them into the applesauce and mixing it all around.

"I took Spanish in high school myself," Trent's mom said.

"Oh yeah? Cool. Isn't it a beautiful language?" Hillary asked.

Trent looked at his mom, hoping she'd just say yes. But she shook her head, dyed blonde hair swinging about, and cut some meat away from a bone.

"To be honest with you, I didn't do too well in the class. I figured English was all I really needed to know. And it turns out I was right."

"Yeah, but Mom, you love ordering your food in Spanish at El Ranchero."

"Yes, honey, but that's just for fun."

Hillary continued swirling her splintering pork in the applesauce.

"Are the pork chops all right?" Trent's mom asked.

Hillary looked up, brown irises slightly avoiding eye contact.

"They look delicious. But, I actually don't eat meat anymore."

Trent's mom put her chin in her hand and looked down at her plate before looking back up at Hillary.

"Really? Why not?"

"Mom, there are obvious reasons for not eating meat."

Hillary told Trent it was all right and explained herself to his mom. She'd watched a documentary on factory farms a few months ago and saw all the dead pigs hanging upside down before they were gutted. It made her feel sick when she saw it. The other reason was that she just plain old liked animals, and enjoyed them better alive than dead. She told Trent's mom about her family's dog and how she couldn't imagine anybody wanting to eat a dog, and what was the big difference between a dog and a pig.

"The difference is dogs are pets and pigs are food—food that I took the time to cook."

"Mom, come on. She's allowed to not eat meat if she doesn't want to. It's totally reasonable."

Hillary looked down at her plate.

"Well, honey, she should probably eat some meat to help her get some on her bones."

Trent didn't see Hillary as skinny. She was fit, but her short frame supported curves that made him think of her body as misaligned parentheses.

"Yeah, it's going to make it hard for me when I get to Puerto Rico. They pretty much only eat meat there," Hillary said.

Brent's mom cocked her head back.

"You're going to Puerto Rico?"

"Well, probably not anytime soon, but I want to as soon as I can. Hopefully in a study abroad during college or something."

"And why would you want to go there?"

"Mom, why wouldn't you want to go to the Caribbean? It's tropical there."

“I want to go there for a few reasons,” Hillary replied. “Mostly because of a place off the east coast. There’s an island there, called Vieques, and off it’s shore there’s this thing called bioluminescence. The water is filled with these tiny aquatic creatures that light up to attract the predators of their predators. You can swim all around in them. And if you get out of the water quickly you can see them glowing while they’re stuck to your body.”

Trent’s mom stood from the table and picked up her plate.

“Well, that dark hair of yours will help you fit in down there.”

Hillary offered to help do the dishes, but Trent told her she didn’t need to. He quickly walked her out to her car, her dad’s El Camino, and told her that he was sorry that his mom was weird, but that she meant the best. Hillary giggled and told him that she reminded her of her own mom. Trent stood next to her as she pulled the keys out of her pocket.

“So maybe one of these nights we could get away from both of our moms,” he said.

“Yeah, that would be cool.”

She grabbed the back of his flannel and pulled him in, kissing him for the third night in a row.

Trent thumbed through his ties. Maybe he should go with the one that was more subdued, so that he didn’t come across as overbearing. He was plenty familiar with the complaints from the employees about the managers always trying to assert their superiority, and wanted to separate himself from such sentiment. The navy blue one from

Hillary still hung loosely, untied, across the collar of the shirt he wore to her great aunt's funeral. They'd been dating for four months and she still hadn't brought him over to her parents' house for dinner, but then decided to invite him to the service. She said she wanted the emotional support. It was early in their senior year and the first time since middle school that he wasn't in band. Hillary had told him that he should stick with the oboe, that it was sexy, and that she hoped she wasn't the reason he decided to give it up. Trent told her that it was a personal decision.

He agreed to go with her to the service and she told him that he'd need to dress up for it. Trent didn't have anything that he could wear to a funeral and so she went out to Fred Meyer and bought him a grey shirt and the blue tie. They drove to the church separately from her parents, in the El Camino. It was Trent's first funeral and he stood in the back with her, arm around her waist. The pastor talked about her great aunt's love of family and gift giving and Jesus. Hillary clutched the back of Trent's shirt as the procession moved the casket through the aisle and out to the hearse. At the buffet in the church's lawn, Trent exchanged formalities with Hillary's parents. He'd chatted with them before, but was again meeting them in passing. He and Hillary filled their plates with egg salad and pasta salad and potato salad, before taking a seat at a picnic table.

"You look pretty cute in a tie," she said.

"Thanks for helping me tie it."

She smiled and straightened it out.

"It's pretty crazy isn't it?"

"What?" he asked.

“The whole dying thing. I mean, it’s something that’s going to happen to everyone here.”

Trent took a bite of mixed salad and bobbed his head up and down, up and down. Cumulus clouds took turns eclipsing the sun, each one moving on toward the Cascade Mountains within a few minutes, the intervals shedding light on Hillary’s purple dress.

“Yeah, it’s pretty crazy to think about.”

“Do you really think about it though?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“I try not to, but I know it’s true.”

“I think it’s pretty wild that we do think about it. I feel like if our lifespan were any longer, death would be far enough away that we wouldn’t bother contemplating it. But if our lifespan were any shorter, we wouldn’t waste any time thinking about it. It’s like we’re alive for the perfect amount of time to worry about dying.”

Hillary suggested that they hop in the El Camino and go for a drive, out toward the mountains. Trent agreed and she told her parents they were going to take off. They spent most of the ride in silence, as she drove slowly for the foothills. They didn’t make it to the mountains, but rather pulled off at a service road that took them down to a river. They got out and decided to lie down in the back of the El Camino. Hillary laid her head in the nook between his shoulder and chest.

“So what do you think you’re going to do after graduation?” Hillary asked.

Trent had been working at Royal Slice for a couple months as a busboy and was enjoying it. He made enough money to pay for all his expenses and saw some of his co-workers rising quickly to higher positions.

“I don’t know for sure. I’d like to keep going to school, but I might just work for a little while and save up some money first. What about you? Are you still set on going to the university right away?”

“I’ll probably start off at the community college to save a little money before I go to the university. And then I figure I’ll go travel around whenever I can.”

“That sounds pretty good. I think I’d like to do that too, maybe check out Europe. Write a book or something.”

“That sounds so cool. We should go there together...I want to see Florence.”

Trent smiled and kissed her, tongue moving too quickly in her mouth. He reached under her dress and slid his hand upward.

“Do you want to?” she asked.

Trent nodded and reached into his wallet, pulling out a condom that was nearly expired. She put it on him, the one practical skill she’d learned in health class. He kept his shirt and tie on for the whole, short time. They snuggled in the back of the El Camino for a few hours afterward.

Trent decided on the navy blue tie. He pulled it out and draped it across his collar. He thought about how it would help make for a subtle introduction as manager and how it felt like Hillary was still around him, even though she’d left to live with her aunt in Portland. She’d already signed up for a winter quarter Spanish class at the community college down there and he wondered if she might come back for spring break.

They'd moved in together immediately following graduation and spent the next five months sharing a bed and meals, before she took off a couple of weeks ago. Their living arrangement was fine, but she decided it was time for her to move on from Marysville, with him or without. The morning she left there was an unseasonably early snowfall. He walked her out to the El Camino, which had become hers as a graduation present, and thought about how strange it was that the only thing he'd ever seen in the back of it besides the two of them was this tarp that stretched over her belongings, and under a couple inches of snow. In the couple of weeks since she left for Portland, they'd talked a few times. He shared the news with her about his promotion and she said she was happy for him.

Trent stood in front of the bathroom mirror and fumbled around with the knot on the tie, reworking it several times before acknowledging that he didn't know what he was doing. He grabbed his phone and started to dial Hillary's number. She'd be able to explain to him how to tie it, but he promptly hung the phone up and walked back over to his closet. He grabbed his music-themed tie, the clip-on, and put it on before finishing his morning routine.

Try a Little Tenderness

On the day the city planned to cut down the maple that Aaron had hung himself from, Bill came to the park to chain himself to its trunk. He arrived at about ten o'clock and there was no sign that the work was about to start, so he took off his backpack and sat down on an adjacent bench. He looked over at the tree and saw a young woman sitting just outside the area that it shaded, burning ants with a magnifying glass. Her yellow sundress spilled across the lawn as she sat cross-legged next to the entrance to the ant colony, about fifteen feet from him. Every few minutes she stood and stretched her arms horizontally, her dress hanging from a tall, stringy frame, like laundry drying on a clothesline.

The heat had started early, forecasting the kind of Chicago day when the smell of barbecued pork permeated the stoops of brownstones, where cans of Old Style were sipped over backgammon. At the park, moms and kids were already seeking shade. And sitting at the other end of the bench from Bill was a shirtless old man, whistling. The man had expert pitch and his projection must have reached the woman. He whistled Ode to Joy and tapped a hand against his flat, pink belly, while occasionally breaking from the tune to take a bite from a sandwich half. Bill watched the woman. Her hair was the color of some kind of wood, cherry perhaps. The whistler looked over at Bill and spoke at a volume meant to stay between the two of them.

“Do you think that girl there is burning bugs or just looking at them?”

“Can you keep whistling? I really like that song.”

“I think she’s burning ‘em,” he said before carrying on with the Ode.

Bill wondered if maybe she actually was just looking at the ants. From his distance it seemed like she was angling the magnifying glass to work in concert with the sun to burn them, but, he wondered, maybe she was a scientist. An entomologist, or was it etymologist—either way, a researcher. She did occasionally scribble something in a notebook, perhaps observing and recording. But as he continued watching, it seemed that she was in fact burning them, as the magnifying glass was held too far from her face to be used as a seeing aid. The whistler finished the Ode and looked back at Bill.

“Anything else you want to hear?”

Bill thought about it for a moment. This was not the kind of decision he was used to making at ten o’clock on a Thursday. He worked as a paper shredder at a mortgage brokerage, feeding property profiles and loan applications into a humming, dissecting robot for thirty-five hours a week. The most pressing decision he had to make on a typical morning was whether to empty its receptacle now or after shredding a few more documents. And since a couple months ago, when his boss told him he couldn’t wear his headphones while working until he picked up his old pace, he tended to empty it as often as possible, removing half-filled bags to silence the shredder’s monotone hum. But here he was now, just a couple days after his boss told him to leave and not come back until he gave a shit again, deciding which tune he wanted this talented man to whistle.

“I’d love to hear that one again,” Bill replied.

“The Ode again? But I’ve got a whole repertoire.”

Bill ran through a few songs in his mind: *La Vie en Rose*, *Lean on Me*, that Yo-Yo Ma track from the Jamie Foxx movie.

“If you want to finish your lunch, I’ll think about it a little more,” Bill said.

The whistler looked down at his sandwich half.

“I don’t think I’m gonna be able to finish this actually. You want it?”

He held it out toward Bill, a half-bitten piece of salami falling onto the bench between them. The whistler picked it up and tossed it to a pigeon.

“No thanks. “

“What, you don’t like sandwiches? Are you foreign or something?”

“No, I like sandwiches. Just not ones with dead animals on them.”

The whistler looked at him and cringed.

“You’re a vegetarian? You’re too skinny to be a vegetarian. And you’re too young to worry about your health.”

“It’s not because of health.”

“Well then what’s your problem?”

“I don’t like death.”

“Oh, you’re an animal lover.”

“I guess so.”

The whistler reclined into the bench.

“And you’re just going to sit back and watch that girl burn up those bugs?”

Bill shrugged and looked back toward the woman and the tree. Since Aaron hung himself from it a couple months ago, Bill had been to the park only one other time. A few days after it happened, he and a couple other friends showed up with cans of Hamm’s, Aaron’s favorite beer, and poured them onto the roots that breached the surface below the maple. They sat below the tree and told a few stories about him as a living person—the time a few years ago when he told their high school biology teacher that he thought he

was the missing link; the time he slept with the middle-aged bartender from the karaoke lounge after getting in with a fake ID and singing *Try a Little Tenderness*; the time he ate mushrooms and, panicking, said, “Can we talk about eternity for a second?”

Bill stared at the tree. Its trunk was scarred by poor pruning cuts and names and hearts denoting confessions of affection. He looked up toward the maple’s canopy. It was one of the taller trees in the park, with an expanse of leaves that provided shade for picnics and cover for squirrels, despite the way they were curling early, with brown spots evidencing the fungal infection that compelled the city to make the condemnation. He looked at the branch that hung about eight feet off the ground, its diameter the size of a cabin’s log, able to hold weight.

“I know what song I want to hear now. “

“Try me.”

“*Try a Little Tenderness.*”

The whistler set down the sandwich and clapped his hands, chuckling.

“Ah, Otis. That’s how I got my first paying gig, whistling Otis. But nobody’s ever requested that one. It’s always *Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay*. That’s how I got into the business. About twenty years ago, there was this Otis cover band that had an amazing singer, but the guy was a terrible whistler. He sounded like a tone-deaf wren. So they held a tryout to cover the solo. Next thing I knew I was traveling from Milwaukee to Saint Louis just to whistle that one verse. But if you want to know the truth, it was a terrible strike of fate that gave me my chance. A few days before Otis died, he recorded *Sittin’ on the Dock* for the first time, but was still working on the words for the last verse. So he just whistled that verse on the demo instead. Then he died, way too soon. Man, I’d

love to do that one for you, if you want. It's been a while for me now, but I could still nail it."

"Nah. That's not what I feel like hearing."

"All right then, I'll give the tenderness a try."

The whistler started into it, and Bill again looked at the woman. She continued with the burning. Bill considered whether he could comfortably chain himself to the tree while she was there. He'd assumed the only impediment to chaining himself to the trunk would be the Parks Department or the police that they called. And while he figured the woman wouldn't try to prevent his actions, he wasn't comfortable with hers. For the past couple of months, he'd become increasingly affectionate toward living things. Whether a rose, or an aphid on its petals, he considered the improbability of each's existence, and sympathized with its drive to continue existing. That this woman was burning ants for seemingly no good reason made Bill uneasy. He stood up and slung his backpack over his shoulder, then walked toward her. The whistler called out to him.

"Hey, where you going? What, is my rendition not good enough for you?"

Bill turned back toward him.

"Actually, can you whistle louder?"

As he walked up to the woman, she stood and looked at him. The dress was checkered in two shades of yellow, made from seersucker, a thin drape that fell from her exposed shoulders to midway down her thighs. She held the magnifying glass in one hand and a pen in the other.

"Hey, excuse me, but..."

"Let me guess. You're going to ask me what I'm doing?"

Bill scratched the scruff on his chin.

“Just curious. Are you burning those ants or looking at them?”

“Both.”

“Why would you burn them?” he asked.

“To test them.”

“What does that mean?”

“I give them the chance to get away from the magnifying glass, but if they don’t do it, they get burnt. It’s a matter of them being fit enough to survive. I’m just a mediator. Want to try it? It’s pretty fun.”

Bill pushed his hair out of his eyes and back under his backward Cubs hat.

“That is so fucked up. You can’t just pretend like you’re God. They’re already carrying things around that are like a thousand times their body weight, just to make sure they have something to eat. The last thing they need is you and your magnifying glass getting in the way of their living.”

“Oh come on, like it matters. Some just aren’t fit to survive, and all I’m doing is exposing the fact.”

Bill turned and walked away, toward the tree. He took off his backpack and kneeled next to the trunk. He reached into his bag and pulled out the chain, a length that he bought from the bulk section of the hardware store the night before. He laid it over the maple’s exposed roots. The links were gold and heavy duty. He leaned against the tree and double looped them tightly around his belly, then took the slack and double looped it around the trunk, cinching it as far as he could, before Master Locking it. A couple minutes later, the woman walked over and stood above him.

“Wow. Am I really that upsetting?”

Bill shrugged and reached into his backpack, pulling out a book; a biography on Houdini that was found next to Aaron’s bed the day after. It was bookmarked at the end of a chapter about the “Buried Alive” stunt, where Houdini was interred, without a casket, six feet under, and then managed to claw his way to the surface, before collapsing from exhaustion. Over the last couple of months, Bill had read, over and over again, the last page that Aaron read. He looked up at the woman.

“I just don’t see why you can’t just let them be alive. What’s so hard about that? You don’t even have to do anything.”

She pulled her sagging dress strap back over her shoulder.

“What’s the big difference? So the sun burns them up, just like it’s going to burn everything else up eventually,” she said.

Bill shook his head.

“So I told you what I’m doing here,” she continued. “Now would you be so kind as to tell me what this whole chaining yourself to a tree thing is about?”

“Something you wouldn’t give a shit about.”

“Oh come on, you don’t even know me.”

Bill opened up his book and started reading the last page again.

“Don’t ignore me.”

He closed the book and set it down.

“You really want to know?” he asked.

She dropped the magnifying glass and held her hands behind her back, then smiled.

“I’ve put down my weapon, so there’s no need to feel threatened.”

Since it happened, Bill had tried to articulate his feelings a few times. He and his friends had spent a couple of drunken nights processing it, concluding repeatedly that, “This shit is just fucked up. That’s all it is. Fucked up.” But at the memorial service, which took two weeks to put together, he spoke before the gatherers, and made more of an effort to be eloquent with his thoughts. He looked out into the crowd, Aaron’s parents sitting in the front row, and explained how he thought Aaron was an asshole at first. They’d met in a seventh grade shop class and Aaron told him he looked like fat Elvis and that he should take Home Ec instead so that he could make himself a rhinestone suit. But once Aaron saw that Bill was making a skateboard deck for his final project, his attitude changed. Shortly thereafter, they were skating together every afternoon and formed a crew that stayed close all the way through high school. He closed out his speech by saying that Aaron was just always so alive, always. After the service, there was a gathering at Bill’s apartment, their usual hangout spot. Along with cans of Hamm’s, a guest book was passed around. When it came to him he wrote, “I don’t know who’s going to entertain at this party until you get here. Quit fucking around and walk through the door already.”

Bill glanced back toward the bench and noticed the whistler still sitting there, staring at the two of them, as he covered a new, unfamiliar song. Something classical, maybe Beethoven, Bill thought. He looked up at the woman.

“The city decided this tree should be cut down, and I don’t think it should be, so I’m here.”

“You’re a little environmentalist. That’s cute.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m an environmentalist.”

“No? Then what’s your agenda?”

“I don’t like death.”

“Funny. Me neither.”

“You’ve got a strange way of showing it.”

She looked upward and then back at him.

“It’s just how I deal with it.”

“What do you mean? You deal with death by killing?”

“The closer you get to it, the more you see it, the easier it is to understand.”

“That’s not how those ants feel.”

“You don’t know that.”

Bill looked back to where she’d been sitting. He pictured the ants finding the burnt bodies of other ants and, in their language, whatever it was, communicating disbelief. He figured they would lift the corpses up, feeling heavier than bumble bees, and move them underground, where they would mourn.

“It’s just that I’m trying to stand up for life here and it’s hard to do so while you’re doing that. So can you just stop or take it elsewhere?”

“You’ve got your way of protesting death, and this is mine.”

“Why?”

She ran a hand through her hair, holding her bangs up and then letting them fall back into the same place.

“Because my dad died of skin cancer.”

Bill looked upward, the branch hung above him, its summer leaves giving the appearance of autumn. He looked back at her.

"I'm sorry. I know how you must feel."

"Really," she said, drawing out the vowels.

"Yeah, really. See that branch right there?" Bill pointed up to it. "My friend hung himself from it almost exactly two months ago."

"So that's why you're here."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You should've told me."

Bill tried to lean forward, wanting to say something profound, but the chain halted him. He fell back onto the trunk, its scars right above his head. Carlie loved Kent on 4/5/09 and Ray loved Julia on 8/15/10.

"And now you're just going to sit here until the cops come with their bolt-cutters?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, that sounds exciting and it looks like you've got enough chain to fit somebody else in there with you."

"Yeah, probably."

Bill took out the key and turned it inside the Master Lock. He uncoiled the chain and held it in his lap. She sat down next to him and he wrapped two loops around himself before handing it to her. She did the same and handed the slack back to him, which he looped around the trunk, cinching it tight. They sat quietly for a few minutes, before the whistler walked up to them.

“What are you kids doing?”

“Could you just keep whistling?” Bill asked.

The whistler rubbed his sunburned belly.

“I could, but what are you doing? Trying to make some kind of point or something?”

“Performance art,” she said. “Just like you.”

“Like me?”

“I don’t care what song it is,” Bill said, “but could you just sit over there and whistle it?”

He said he sure could and walked back over to the bench, starting into “Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay.”

After a couple minutes, Bill asked her what she’d been writing in the notebook.

“Ant obituaries.”

Bill leaned back into the tree. They sat there, waiting for the city to show up and tell them to get out of the park. The sun filtered through the leaves, which remained still, though appearing ready to fall.

Aviva and The Paintbrush

Ben had been loafing around the Space Needle's observation deck for about an hour when, through a telescope, he watched a seagull nudge one of her chicks off a waterfront building. The chick flapped its wings and seemed to glide upward for a moment, before freefalling twenty feet to the wooden pier. Noting its location, he turned and walked straight to the queue for the elevator. The usher packed him into the glass cell alongside a swarm of tourists. On the way down, the operator recited a few jokes about rain while Ben wormed his way to the edge of the crowd, looking out the window toward where the chick landed. As they neared the ground and the pier disappeared from view, he plotted his route to the chick. He pictured himself exiting the elevator and passing through the rows of Sleepless in Seattle nighties in the gift shop, shoving through the revolving door as quickly as possible, and, within a few blocks, passing below his old apartment's third floor deck where two months earlier he'd swallowed three Xanax after his girlfriend sat him down and said she'd decided to go through with ending the pregnancy. A few blocks farther along and he'd pass the coffee shop where a month earlier he'd drank chamomile and saw her for the last time after talking through what they'd deemed a see-you-soonish. Then, around the corner, he'd see a cruise ship hogging the view of the bay.

He neared their old apartment, but turned off to take a side street down to the waterfront. As he passed the cruise ship and jogged the last two blocks, his face reddened and heart seemed to turn off and on, off and on and off, leaving a cavity where anxious

breezes blew through him. A hot dog vendor called out to him, a child's Mylar balloon clubbed his shoulder, a man offered a joke for spare change.

At the pier, a middle-aged lady was hunched over the chick, assessing the damage. Her red hair was cropped short and she wore a rose-print skirt with a grey tee that was cut low enough to reveal a few tentacles of an octopus tattoo across her décolletage. Ben stood on the opposite side of the motionless bird.

"Is it still alive?" he asked.

"She's still breathing, but she's suffering," the lady said.

"What can I do to help?"

"Well, I'd really rather not do it myself. But I'd hate to ask someone else to do it either."

Ben looked at the chick, its body appearing intact, with fluff like a snow leopard's. He leaned in closer and saw the disfigurement in its wing, like a wishbone that had been snapped. It chirped meekly.

"Do what?"

She looked at Ben and sighed.

"I'll just do it. Look away."

She mumbled something before placing her hands around the chick's neck.

"No! Wait! Please?" Ben cried.

"Please what? The poor thing's suffering. Look at her. She's broken."

The chick began twitching.

"You're scaring it," Ben said.

"Then you deal with it if you're so comforting."

He stepped forward and stood above the chick, then reached into his pockets and searched through his corduroy pants and denim jacket, pulling out a bus transfer, a few intermingled pipe cleaners, and a wadded dollar bill. The pipe cleaners were from an art project that he'd led a few days earlier during his tutoring session. Each of his eight students used them to fashion insects—mostly spiders, a couple grasshoppers, and one praying mantis. The praying mantis, said the student, is cool not just because it eats its mate, but because sometimes when it's molting it gets stuck inside its old skin and dies. The student had offered Ben the pipe cleaner mantis and he'd accepted, shoving it into the pocket of the jacket that he'd grabbed off his floor before heading to the Space Needle.

Ben looked down at the chick and then up at the lady.

"Do you have any tape?" he asked.

"What? No, I don't have any tape. What are you doing? You don't look like you know what you're doing."

Ben pulled the pipe cleaners apart, straightened them, and knelt next to the chick. He untied his right shoe and then unlaced it, before measuring the pipe cleaner against the chick's wing. The pipe cleaner was too long and Ben asked the lady if she had something to cut it.

"No, I don't have a knife or tape or anything."

"You don't have anything at all that can help me cut through this?"

"You're just going to make it suffer more than it already is."

Ben folded the pipe cleaner in half, pressed it gently against the chick's wing, and attempted to tie it down with his shoelace. The chick faintly chirped as it continued to

twitch. The knots were too loose, then too tight as Ben struggled to create an adequate splint. The lady reached into her purse, sifted around, and pulled out a short, thin wooden paintbrush with initials inscribed into the handle.

“Here, just use this as your splint instead.”

Ben took the paintbrush and looked it over.

“Awesome. This’ll definitely work better. Can you hold it against the wing while I tie it?”

“No, I have to go now.”

“Please?”

“No. Really, I don’t want to watch it suffer. But I do want that brush back.

Whenever you’re done with it, just take it over to the magic shop at Pike Place. If I’m not there, tell them it’s Jo’s. ”

She walked away and Ben managed to tie the brush handle snugly against the wing, then wrapped the chick in his jacket and walked to the bus stop.

On the bus ride to his mom’s house, Ben took a seat near the rear exit door, keeping the chick half-hidden in his jacket under his arm. He arrived at his mom’s house in Lake City, Seattle’s northernmost neighborhood. She was away somewhere for business and the place was all his for the week. Since he had moved back in, he’d reconverted his room, temporarily her craft room, into his room. He brought up his plastic tubs from the basement and pulled out his books and baseball cards and posters and maps, all buried during his encounter with adulthood. Most of the maps were from

his mom. Wherever she went to give a presentation on water conservation, she brought one back for him. He recovered his walls with Omaha, Tokyo, Patagonia, Zurich, and his favorite, the Bosphorus Strait. She was gone often, but never for more than a handful of days, and always took him out to his favorite pizza place when she returned.

The chick had stopped twitching. Ben laid it on the living room couch and walked down to the basement. He pulled out the boxes labeled Halloween Decorations and dug through them until he found the scarecrow stuffing, then took an armful of straw upstairs and shaped it as bedding on one of the couch's throw pillows. The splint was still fastened snugly as he set the chick onto its bed and walked to the kitchen pantry to find it something to eat. He pulled out a bag of cat food that had long been tucked into the back corner. The sell-by date had passed, but Ben scooped it out anyway, pouring it into a small bowl that he filled with water to soften it up. After it turned to mush, he took out an eye-dropper and sat down to the chick. It was calm and breathing at a steady pace as he held the dropper to its beak, gently pushing forward. Its beak opened and Ben tilted its head upward with his other hand, before letting the mush drip in. He pressed his forefinger against the chick's throat and felt it swallow. He did this a few times, and then gave it a small bowl of water and a name, Aviva.

He spent the night on the couch, and thought about how his dad used to fall asleep here with the daily crossword resting on his chest. The following morning, pre-teen Ben would pick up the mostly-finished puzzle and fill in the empty boxes. His dad would act dumbfounded every time, but as Ben later learned, he had intentionally left some of the easier clues unfinished. He still did puzzles with his dad occasionally, when one of them made the hour-long trek between Seattle and Olympia, where he lived now. Though his

parents had been divorced seven years, they remained friendly, and met together with Ben every couple months for a movie or ballgame.

Aside from his part-time tutoring job, Ben spent the next two days sticking close to the house, nursing Aviva and reading online about avian care. He decided Aviva was a girl though she might have been male, or somewhere in between. She sometimes twitched, but seemed in otherwise stable health with the paintbrush still snug against her wing, leaving Ben reluctant to remove it. He decided to call the magic shop to tell Jo that he'd need to hang on to the brush for a little longer.

Jo answered and told Ben that she did have a minute, and asked how the chick was doing. He told her that Aviva's appetite sometimes escaped her, and that her wing was still disfigured, but she generally seemed fine.

"So you gave her a name, huh?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

"I guess I wouldn't be so quick to get attached, but it sounds like that's something you're not too worried about. Hey, so when can you bring the brush down to me?"

Ben paused and thought about how he hadn't figured out something else for a splint and what damage he might cause by trying to replace the brush. It seemed to be working fine and he assumed it wouldn't be a big deal if he hung onto it as long as he needed.

"I'd really like it if you could get it back to me this afternoon. That brush is kind of a family heirloom and is super important to me."

“Oh, okay.”

“So I’ll be working at the magic shop until three. Can you make it down here by then?”

“I suppose so.”

Ben hung up the phone and walked into his room. He pulled the sheet off his bed, then found a pair of scissors and a manual staple gun in his mom’s office. He measured a portion of the bed sheet against Aviva and cut out a rectangle. He folded one end inward, laid straw across the entire length, and then rolled it into the shape of a cornucopia. He stapled it shut and placed Aviva inside, before taking her with him to the bus stop.

He arrived at Pike Place’s upper floor and made his way past the fishmongers and produce vendors, descending toward the bookshops and jewelers and tobacconists in the market’s lower levels. If Seattle were to sell itself as a perfume, Ben thought, it was this place—where incense and old hardwoods and sea air allied—that would be the bottling source. He followed the ramps down to the magic shop, its walls covered with vaudevillian Houdini posters, and saw Jo at the counter, selling a handcuff kit to a teenager. After she finished the transaction, he walked up to her with Aviva tucked under his arm.

“Hey.”

“Holy shit. Is the bird inside that blanket thing?”

Ben explained to her that he didn’t want to leave Aviva alone, and wanted to show to her that the brush was working well as a splint.

“So my great-uncle’s paintbrush is still attached to a bird wing. Weird. Look, there’s got to be something else that’s designed for this kind of thing.”

“But I don’t want to disrupt what’s working. Here, I’ll show you.”

“Hold on. Not here, honey. I’m off in about fifteen minutes and we can take a little walk and get this sorted out.”

Ben walked around outside the shop, paying a quarter to look through a viewfinder at a pair of shoes worn by the world’s tallest man. Jo came out and they entered the open air, walking down steps in the sun, and Ben asked her if she was a magician.

“Not professionally,” she said. “It’s just a summer thing.”

“That must be nice.”

She went on to tell him that when she turned thirty a few years ago she decided to not be tied down to a particular place anymore, especially not Tulsa, and got this summer job in Seattle, while taking off in the winter for the likes of interning with a traditional healer in Dominica and volunteering at a sloth refuge in Costa Rica.

“But anyway,” she said, “I do want that brush back, and it really isn’t the solution anyway.”

“I’m afraid I’ll make it worse though.”

They reached the waterfront and she suggested they take a seat on a bench near the ferry terminal to keep talking. They sat down, choosing their spots somewhere between the distance of strangers and the proximity of friends. The octopus tentacles twirled above the sagging collar of her peach tank top. Ben peeked at them through his sunglasses and noticed there was a fish in one of the tentacles, small and silver with wide eyes. And in the background there were a few smaller octopuses, which made him want

to tell her that octopuses actually stop eating after they lay eggs and then die after the eggs hatch.

“So do you want to let me see her now?” Jo asked.

Ben laid the makeshift nest between them and eased Aviva out. Jo’s eyes widened as she lowered her head and inhaled.

“Ben, she needs help. She needs help soon, like from people that know how to do this.”

“What do you mean she needs help? She’s getting help. And she’s been doing better and better.”

Jo leaned in for a closer look and shook her head.

“She looks the same to me. She looks broken. Ben, this is a small, vulnerable animal that needs professional help. Look at her. She’s sickly and has a paintbrush attached to her mangled wing.”

He leaned away from her, slightly.

“I’m not taking her to some stranger that doesn’t actually care about whether she lives or otherwise.”

“Look, I love that you care so much about her. But just look at her. Do you think that she’s supposed to look like this? Don’t you think she’ll have a better chance if you take her to a vet?”

Ben looked back at Aviva. Her wing wasn’t any better. If anything it looked even more lifeless and disfigured, like a downy fossil. And she was thinner, losing weight where there wasn’t any. It seemed the webbing on her feet had turned from pink to gray, and begun to sag. The word that entered his head was *emaciated*. He thought about Jo’s

suggestion and considered what a veterinarian might conclude. He looked up from Aviva and out toward the water at the glistening movement of swells and sails against the still, mountainous backdrop. He thought about when he came back in from their apartment's deck and his ex-girlfriend told him that they were in no position whatsoever to give a child the kind of life that a person deserves.

"Ben," Jo said. "I know a very reputable wildlife center right across the bay. They'll probably take her in, give her what she needs, and then call you up when she's ready to be released. It's just a half hour ferry ride from here. I'd even go over there with you."

He looked at Aviva again.

"Ben, she needs it."

"Okay, fine. Let's do it."

Ben put Aviva back in her nest and they crossed the street to the terminal, waiting for the boat to arrive. They walked aboard the ferry and took an outside bench seat on the stern where they could watch Seattle's skyline as they crossed. The bay reflected the sun, which occasionally disappeared behind loafing clouds that sprinkled bathwater rain. The ferry glided toward Bainbridge Island, where they were to take a short bus ride out to the rehab center. Ben often peeked in on Aviva, and Jo assured him that she'd be fine for now, repeating that he was making the right decision.

"Thanks, I hope I am. So what's so special about the paintbrush anyway?"

"It was my great-uncle's. He was a painter, actually pretty well-known in Europe, though not so much here. He used the brush to paint my favorite piece of his. It wasn't any kind of major work, but it was a stunningly subtle little watercolor of an eggplant

flower that was just starting to turn to fruit. He did it a few months before he passed and gave it and the brush to me the last time I saw him.”

Her hands waved about as she described him and his curly gray hair. She often visited him in Seattle during her childhood summers, and sometimes traveled to the Mediterranean with him in her teens. There, they would go on road trips with his artsy friends and she grew up figuring that that was how to live.

“He taught me that you should approach life like it’s a theme park, and so that’s what I try to do wherever I am. But not just like you’re *at* a theme park, but like you *are* a theme park—exciting, twirling, putting smiles on faces. Even right now, we should be treating this bench like it’s a seat on a Ferris wheel.”

“But it doesn’t move.”

“So pretend we’re stuck at the top.”

“Like it’s the Space Needle.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Ben half-smiled and gazed at the receding city.

They arrived at the island and got on the bus out to the rehab center. As they rode, Ben placed his fingers into Aviva’s nest, stroking her head and remaining mostly silent. Jo continued to provide reassurance and flashed smiles toward Ben whenever he seemed to drift off. They reached their stop and walked down a cedar chip trail through a fir grove to the center’s entrance. Inside, a graying lady asked how she could help them. Ben stood there with Aviva tucked under his arm, his heart fluttering. Jo told the lady that

they had a seagull chick that needed attention and nudged Ben toward the counter. He stepped forward and laid the nest down, before easing Aviva out.

“Oh my, it does need attention. What is that on its wing?”

“A paintbrush, for a splint,” Jo said.

“Oh, I see. I’ll take it back and have the vet give a quick onceover. Are you folks on your way or did you want to stick around for a few?”

“Stick around,” Ben said.

They took a seat in the lobby and Ben remained quiet, looking up through the skylight that was speckled with pinecones left over from last season. Jo occasionally put a hand on his shoulder, rubbing gently while she thumbed through a National Geographic. The vet walked out, holding Jo’s paintbrush.

“Here, you can have this back.”

“Thanks,” Jo said, tucking it back into her purse.

“So is she going to be all right?” Ben asked.

“Well, it looked like the splint thing you guys used had been on there a while. And, frankly, it wasn’t ideal. Regardless, she wasn’t going to be in great shape either way.”

“So what are you saying?” Ben asked.

The vet explained that they’d do what they could, but there were no guarantees, and it would be helpful if they could make a donation for the services.

“When will we find out how she’s doing?” Ben asked.

“We’ll give you a call in a couple days and let you know.”

Jo said thanks and threw a few dollars in the donation box as she took Ben by the arm and turned toward the exit. They rode the bus back to the ferry terminal. This time they took a bench seat on the bow, again facing the city. The ferry moved through the mild summer evening, and Jo asked Ben how he was doing. He shrugged and said he didn't know. Jo comforted him, telling him that Aviva was going to be fine. Ben nodded and thanked her.

“So, I've got to ask. When Aviva was on the ground it seemed like you knew what happened before you got there. Did you?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“I saw her fall while I was looking through a telescope in the Space Needle.”

“Really? Wild. But aren't you from Seattle? What were you doing up in the Space Needle?”

“I wanted to see what the city looked like without it.”

VITA

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